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ABSTRACT

Case studies of five urban high schools illustrate some important factors that appear to be crucial in determining whether or not reform efforts are implemented. Among these factors are the following: (1) teacher participation; (2) collegiality among staff members; (3) shared belief that change can occur; (4) leadership by the principal; (5) sharing of power and vision among staff; (6) a program that is congruent with the vision, and developed from a coherent set of ideas and beliefs about education; and (7) some early successes in implementing the program. Common problems during implementation include those with the environment, with people, and with the program. When principals attack problems with a repertoire of coping strategies, including a variety of vigorous managing and capacity-building interventions, there is greater likelihood that the school improvement program will be integrated into the school's overall operation. These case studies illustrate particular ways that secondary school principals can involve other staff members in the reform effort. (MLF)

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REVIEWS IN

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Far West Laboratory
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The Principal and Secondary School Improvement

The effective schools research of the past decade thrusts the principal into the limelight as the instructional leader of the school. This leadership is evident as principals work to establish a common vision for their schools, create systems for monitoring student progress, raise expectations for student performance, supervise teachers' classroom instruction, and create climates that encourage effective teaching and learning.

While this effective schools research focuses primarily on elementary schools, the message is clear: without strong principals at the helm, schools stand little chance of having the leadership required to establish a productive learning environment for students and teachers.

At the same time that the findings and implications of the effective schools research are receiving attention, there are increasing cries for secondary school reform. Improvements directed toward high schools are recommended by national commissions and noted scholars. For example, reforms suggested in the National Commission on Excellence in Education's *A Nation at Risk* and Ernest Boyer's *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* include altering course requirements, varying teaching methods, and raising graduation standards. Such improvements are meant to increase the rigor and quality of the high school curriculum and instructional programs.

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Case studies illustrate important guiding principles, events and actions associated with a comprehensive secondary school improvement effort.

Policymakers and educators would not be wise to depend heavily on the effective schools research to help inform them about secondary school reform. This research, with its emphasis on the characteristics of elementary schools, provides little insight about secondary school improvement or the leadership roles that high school principals play in making schools more productive. High schools differ substantially from elementary schools in their organizational structures, staffing patterns, and the students they serve.

Judging that there is a growing need for information about secondary school improvement and the principal's role in such change efforts, a group of researchers led by Matthew Miles conducted case studies of five urban high schools during the 1985-86 school year for the Center for Survey Research in Boston. These school sites were located in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Ohio, and California. Each school was involved in a comprehensive school improvement effort.

Although these programs had different goals, they focused on such areas as improving student achievement, providing extensive staff development, and reducing attendance problems. In some schools, the reform efforts were well established and successfully implemented. In others schools, the programs were immature and had little effect on curriculum development, school climate, or student achievement.

In an effort to capture how school improvement occurs in secondary schools, it is possible to focus special attention on the critical role that principals and other high school leaders play in successfully implementing change.

Although the case study findings provide useful information about the principal's role in secondary school improvement, they are not a blueprint for district officials, principals, and teachers interested in implementing new school reform measures. Rather, they illustrate some important guiding principles, events, and actions associated with a comprehensive secondary school improvement effort.

Successful Program Implementation

The successful school improvement programs varied in the five high schools. Nevertheless, several factors appear to be crucial in determining whether or not reform efforts are implemented. These factors include:

- The participation of teachers in planning and implementation;
- Having a sense of collegiality among staff members;
- A shared belief that problems are not insurmountable and that change can occur;
- The leadership and vision of the principal;
- The sharing of power and vision among staff;
- A program that is congruent with the vision, and developed from a coherent set of ideas and beliefs about education; and
- Some early successes in implementing the program.

The leadership of the principal is a key ingredient for successful school improvement. That leadership by principals assumes involving a variety of people in the change effort to ensure staff members' investment and commitment. While principals can provide some

initial leadership in directing schools towards their visions, they can also provide staff members with opportunities to share in the development and refinement of this vision.

Principals who successfully empower others within the organization to make decisions and to take responsibility for school improvement and change stand a better chance of implementing new programs. By providing opportunities for others to share in the decisionmaking process, principals can ween themselves from being the sole leaders of school reform efforts. Leadership is what becomes critical, not the leader per se.

Urban high schools, because of their size and staffing patterns, can constrain principals' abilities to lead a reform effort. However, these schools can provide opportunities for delegating responsibility. For instance, in the two schools with the most successful programs, department heads and other key administrative coordinators were groomed to assume the leadership role in increasing their school's focus on curriculum and supervision.

Leadership Styles

Regardless of whether principals lead a school reform effort by themselves or delegate some responsibility for this enterprise, the particular style of leadership employed can be critical for successful program implementation. In these case studies, there are four features of leadership style among the secondary school principals:

- Scanning the environment and maintaining connections with outside agencies and organizations;
- Coping with change by identifying and applying rapid solutions to ongoing problems;
- Having a vision or well-defined philosophy of the direction in which the school should proceed; and
- Delegating responsibility for program implementation while monitoring its progress.

Once again, these findings highlight the central leadership role that principals can play in providing the impetus necessary for change and improvement. School improvement is more likely when principals are proactive in determining needs, coping with problems, communicating direction, and sharing responsibility for the operations of the school. While delegation of responsibility among staff members may be important, someone—typically the principal—is ultimately responsible for supervising the overall operation of the program.

Common Problems During Implementation

As with any major change effort, high school improvement is not problem-free. Whenever people are asked to alter their actions and attitudes, some resistance usually surfaces. Although there are myriad uncertainties, ambiguities, and perplexities that can impede any school improvement effort, the case studies reveal the types of problems that are likely to arise. These difficulties typically fall into three major categories: problems with the environment, with people, and with the program.

Environment. In understanding how change occurs, the context within which the reform effort is placed must be considered, especially those charac-

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teristics that might inhibit the change effort from being implemented. These environmental problems can take a variety of forms, some of which include:

- Inadequate resources: lack of time, personnel, and funds;
- Powerlessness: little control over budget, staffing, and policies;
- Competing external demands: outside pressures requiring peoples' time and energy;
- Inadequate facilities: limited or inappropriate space; and
- Unanticipated crises: unscheduled events requiring problem solving action.

People. Another important consideration when implementing a new program is the reaction of people who will be asked to change their own activities. Without the commitment of staff members, any change effort is ultimately doomed to fail. Typical difficulties that arise in working to gain this commitment are:

- Resistant attitudes: reluctance to change, lack of motivation, and philosophical differences; and
- Deficient skills: lack of requisite skills.

Program. Besides the difficulties imposed by the environment and people, the actual program to be implemented can be flawed. Because any school improvement program needs to be adjusted to meet the particular environmental and personnel contraints of each school setting, some adjustments are inevitable. To expect that a program that successfully operates in one school will work with the same efficiency in another school is a dangerous misconception. Those difficulties that are associated with programs include:

- Missing the target population: inability to reach those students, teachers, parents that would benefit the most from the program;
- Conflicting content: mismatch between the new reform and current programs and activities; and
- Inadequate processes: lack of coordination, delays in getting started, and insufficient planning.

Of these problem areas, those concerned with people (i.e., resistance, lack of skills) are more critical than issues of program content and process. Environmental problems appear to be the least pervasive. Even if physical and fiscal resources are limited, people are ultimately the ones that must be commited to an improvement program for it to function properly. Without reducing or eliminating resistance from those who will be responsible for conducting the program, there is little that principals or other school leaders can do to ensure successful program implementation.

Coping with Implementation Problems

The inevitability of problems occuring during a major period of change dictates that principals be prepared to cope with these difficulties. Principals can choose to ignore, delay, or confront problems as they arise or they can anticipate problems before they develop. There are a variety of coping strategies available to principals that affect peoples' actions and attitudes and the operation of the school.

Coping strategies. High school principals can treat implementation problems superficially or they can confront them with more systematic and deep-rooted responses. Miles refers to these

responses as "shallow" or "deep" coping strategies. Shallow strategies tend to be short-term and reactive; deep strategies are long-lasting and take more time and energy to implement.

Some of the more common shallow coping strategies principals were documented using include:

- Postponing decisions about how to handle the problem;
- Delegating the problem to an individual or existing group;
- Shuffling people to different positions;
- Simplifying the program to make it less objectionable;
- Encouraging greater effort and dedication during ceremonies and large-scale events;
- Reinforcing good performance or promising rewards prior to program implementation;
- Bargaining and compromising with staff; and
- Pressuring people to participate in the program.

As these examples suggest, shallow coping strategies are cosmetic because they treat the symptoms of the problem, but do little to change the capacities of the organization or individuals to react to change. Shallow strategies tend to rely heavily on the charisma of the principal and ignore changes in the organizational structure that help to reduce the fallout that develops as the reform effort unfolds.

Deep coping strategies are concerned with altering the personal capacities of people and the organization. Examples of deep coping strategies available to principals are:

- Providing staff members with intensive skill training, coaching, and practice;
- Creating a coordinator, change manager, or steering group to take responsibility for directing the program;
- Tracking the progress of the implementation effort;
- Using the assistance of people and organizations outside the school;
- Moving substantial numbers of people in, out, or across jobs;
- Expanding the responsibilities of peoples' roles and positions; and
- Redesigning organizational structures or procedures.

The types of strategies leaders choose have a direct bearing on the degree to which the reform effort is implemented. When principals use a variety of deep coping strategies to confront problems, the chances for successful program implementation increase. Relying only on shallow coping mechanisms does not produce the necessary climate conducive to successful program implementation. When principals attack problems with a repertoire of coping strategies, including a variety of vigorous managing and capacity-building interventions, there is greater likelihood that the school improvement program will be integrated into the school's overall operation.

Consequences of coping. This study also indicates that the manner in which problems are confronted has far-reaching consequences on the attitudes and actions of those directly and indirectly associated with the reform. For example, when principals use a variety of deep capacity-building strategies, they

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might find that the self-confidence of students and staff members will increase and their anxieties about the program will diminish, the respect of central office staff for the program will increase, and the school's staff development efforts will be better coordinated.

Conversely, when shallow coping strategies are the predominant problem-solving response, principals can expect little investment from people new to the reform effort, divisions among staff members in their support of the program, and a lack of coordination among different parts of the overall program. Finally, whenever problems are ignored or are not addressed systematically, principals can anticipate that these difficulties will not disappear but will continue or re-emerge in the future.

Conclusions

The case studies of urban high school improvement conducted by Miles and his associates help to expand the knowledge of how secondary school improvement can be implemented successfully. Their findings highlight the importance of the principal in leading a successful school reform effort. As secondary school principals direct comprehensive school improvement programs in their sites, they need to ensure that individual pieces of the program are monitored, be proactive in resolving persistent problems that arise during program implementation, and assess and redirect the program as needed. Without this continual monitoring, assessment, and refinement, the school improvement effort can stray from its envisioned purpose.

At first glance, these case studies seem to indicate that effective secondary school principals behave similarly to principals in effective elementary schools. Creating a shared vision, monitoring program implementation, and providing opportunities for staff development seem to be the core activities of leadership in both types of school settings.

Closer inspection of the case study data, however, reveals additional insights about the leadership role of principals not typically associated with the effectiveness research in elementary schools. First, because these case studies focus on how secondary schools improve rather than what they look like once they become effective, they provide a greater understanding of the process by which secondary schools change and improve. In particular, the case studies highlight the difficulties principals are likely to face during program implementation as well as the range of strategies available to them when coping with these problems.

Second, these findings illustrate particular ways that secondary school principals can involve other staff members in the reform effort. High schools typically have staffing patterns and departmental structures that create opportunities for principals to involve others in decision-making. Such options are not always available to elementary school principals. By enlisting the assistance of vice-principals, department chairpersons, curriculum coordinators, or program advisory teams, principals can tap valuable resources of talent, energy, and ideas.

As other staff members become involved in the school improvement process, principals are empowering them to make important decisions about the direction the reform effort takes. Sharing the leadership role with others need not diminish a principal's power and authority. Conversely, empowering staff members increases their investment and commitment toward the ultimate goals of the program.

Finally, what suggestions do these findings provide for principals who want to begin a secondary school improvement program? First of all, principals need to begin preparing themselves and their school settings for change. One way to prepare for change is for principals to create an internal support mechanism. For example, a program advisory committee can be created to form policies, monitor progress, and suggest alterations during program implementation. The formation of such a governing body would be a powerful way to empower other staff members to take some leadership for the program.

Some principals may need or want external support from consultants whose involvement could provide initial guidance and staff development necessary to starting a new program. Often, assistance from an outside expert not directly affiliated with the school helps to legitimate the program for those involved. Regardless of the type of support mechanism used in starting a new school improvement venture, Miles's research indicates that once the program is in progress, principals will need to pay as much attention to how change is being implemented as to what the program is attempting to accomplish.

Readers who want more information about leadership in high schools and the role principals can play in promoting change in schools are directed to the following publications:

Cuban, L. Effective schools: A friendly but cautionary note. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1983, 64, 695-696.

Duke, D. L. *School Leadership and Instructional Improvement*. New York: Random House, 1987.

Firestone, W. A. and Herriott, R. Prescriptions for effective elementary schools don't fit secondary schools. *Educational Leadership*, 1982, 40, 51-53.

Firestone, W. A. and Wilson, B. L. *Using Bureaucratic and Cultural Linkages to Improve Instruction: The High School Principal's Contribution*. Eugene, OR: Center for Educational Policy and Management, 1983.

Hall, G. E. The principal as leader of the change facilitation team. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D. C., 1987.

Miles, M. B. Practical guidelines for school administrators: How to get there. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D. C., 1987.

Miles, M. B., Louis, K. S., Rosenblum, S., Cipollone, A. and Farrar, E. *Improving the Urban High School: A Preliminary Report. Lessons for Managing Implementation*. Boston: Center for Survey Research, 1986.

As secondary school principals direct comprehensive school improvement programs in their sites, they need to monitor, assess and refine the school improvement effort or it can stray from its envisioned purpose.

Bruce Barnett is the director of the Peer-Assisted Leadership Program at Far West Laboratory. He based this article on *Improving the Urban High School: A Preliminary Report. Lessons for Managing Implementation*, by Matthew B. Miles, K.S. Lewis, S. Rosenblum, A. Cipollone and E. Farrar. It is available from the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development was a major sponsor of this research along with the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands, the Conrad Hilton Foundation, the New Jersey State Department of Education, the Fund for New Jersey, and the Boston Foundation.

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